

# BRUNO BETTELHEIM

(1903–1990)



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**B**RUNO BETTELHEIM WAS born in Vienna to upper-middle-class assimilated Jewish parents, Pauline and Anton Bettelheim, on 28 August 1903. Though born when the Hapsburgs still ruled the Austro-Hungarian empire, Bettelheim grew up during the age of Freud. By age fourteen he was already voraciously reading in psychoanalysis, an angle of vision that was to inform his later writings on survivorship and the Holocaust. Bettelheim received his doctoral degree in philosophy and psychology from the University of Vienna in 1938. Soon after, he was incarcerated for approximately one year, as a Jewish political prisoner in two punishment-oriented concentration camps, Dachau and Buchenwald, Bettelheim was released in 1939 thanks to the intervention of Gov. Herbert Lehman of New York and Eleanor Roosevelt.

## Life After the Holocaust

Bettelheim was married twice. His first marriage, to Gina Altstadt, ended in divorce. He married his second wife, Gertrud Weinfeld, also from Vienna, prior to coming to the United States. She died in 1984 and Bettelheim was deeply saddened over her death. They had three children Eric, Naomi, and Ruth.

After his liberation from the camps, Bettelheim eventually joined the faculty of the University of Chicago, where he taught until he retired in 1973. It was in 1944, on the grounds of the University of Chicago, that Bettelheim became the director of the Sonia Shankman Orthogenic School, which, under his direction, became a world-renowned center for the treatment of disturbed children and adolescents, especially autistic children.

Unquestionably, like most survivors, Bettelheim was traumatized by his incarceration, which left its negative imprint on his personal life, his gruff interper-

sonal style, and, at times, his intellectual outlook, as shown by his insensitive and judgmental remarks about Anne Frank and Jewish group behavior during the Holocaust. However, Bettelheim's incarceration was also a source of tremendous creativity and moral insight. One of his first articles, "Individual and Mass Behavior in Extreme Situations," which was based on his experiences in Dachau and Buchenwald, received international attention and praise. As a traumatized survivor, Bettelheim's writing to some extent emanated from his need to "work through" his own camp experiences.

Bettelheim's incarceration was in part the basis for his new concept of treatment of severely troubled children and adolescents at the Orthogenic School, that is, milieu therapy. Milieu therapy includes using the entire staff, at all times, for therapeutic interactions that are part of the child's overall treatment, rather than restricting treatment to a few isolated hours with an individual therapist. According to Bettelheim's friend and colleague, Rudolf Ekstein, the Orthogenic School was a concentration camp in reverse. In a concentration camp, the inmates, the observers, and the persecutors could enter, but for the inmates there was no escape. At the Orthogenic School, the door was closed to outsiders such as curious intruders and parents, but it was always open to the children on the inside. Although this allowed the children to run away, most of the time they would return. (Ekstein, 1991, p. 1080). Moreover, at the Orthogenic School the children ate from china plates and lived in a home that was attractive and comfortable by any standards for institutions. The children also had easy access to a cupboard that was always stocked with candies and snacks.

In 1990, at the age of 86, Bettelheim killed himself by asphyxiation while living in a retirement home. This event was shocking to the public, and in the popular press it was often interpreted as a sign of Bettelheim's personal weakness and mental illness; however, Bettelheim's suicide followed a series of personal set-

back that are, perhaps, more plausible explanations. His wife, Gertrude, died in 1984; he had suffered strokes, illnesses, and declining strength that prevented him from living a productive and meaningful intellectual life; he had strained relations with one of his three children; and he had sought treatment for a recent bout of depression. Bettelheim's decision to kill himself was entirely in sync with those core values that animated his notion of survivorship, such as his emphasis on personal autonomy and self-respect, especially in an extreme situation such as his experience in the concentration camp. It seems Bettelheim's horizon of meaning, his capacity for love and work, had dried up, and this may have led to his decision to commit suicide. In this context, Bettelheim's suicide is the ultimate affirmation of his belief that both inside and outside the concentration camp, personal autonomy and self-respect as manifested by one's capacity to create and live a meaningful life, are to be valued more than mere physical survival. It is not by chance that Bettelheim was always more interested in how concentration camp inmates "remained human" against all odds, than in how they physically survived. The latter, he thought, depended on the Nazis and was more a matter of luck than anything else.

### Maintaining Autonomy in the Concentration Camp and the Mass Society

Bettelheim's provocative and controversial theory of behavior in the concentration camp is widely regarded as one of the most influential narratives to date on this topic. As Christian Fleck and Albert Müller have written, Bettelheim "undoubtedly numbers among the most important and influential analysts of the Nazi concentration camps." His work on the camps has "the status of a 'classic text.'" (Fleck and Müller, pp. 28–29). However, before examining Bettelheim's extraordinary contribution to the understanding of the psychology of the camp inmate, readers need to put this work in the wider cultural perspective that was always his main focus.

Throughout his writings, Bettelheim has been concerned with how the mass society has a tendency to undermine people's struggle to maintain a sense of autonomy and integration. By the term *mass society*, Bettelheim means the highly organized, bureaucratized, technological society in which individuals' capacities to make decisions (that is, to be autonomous) about matters that are of deep concern to them are

subverted, if not totally eliminated. Moreover, when individuals lose their ability to make decisions, their personal integration is also greatly diminished; Personal integration refers to the sense that the different parts of oneself are combined, organized, and working together as a complex whole. It is this potentially destructive tendency in mass society and its negative impact on autonomy and integration that Bettelheim tries to illuminate.

Bettelheim suggests that there is a fundamental progression between the depersonalizing effect of technological mass society (that is, impersonal bureaucracy, the trend-setting media, and intrusive surveillance); the total mass state, such as Nazi Germany; and, most importantly, the concentration camps. Bettelheim saw that if the dehumanizing tendency in mass society is not contained, it could evolve into a total mass state that is capable of using concentration camps to crush the individual's autonomy and integration. This development Bettelheim calls the "concentration camp society" (*Frend's Vienna and Other Essays*, New York: Knopf, 1990, p. 232). Bettelheim points out that the main purpose of the concentration camps reached far beyond their being a place where the SS took revenge on its enemies or made them slaves: "The concentration camp was the Gestapo's laboratory for subjecting free men, but especially the most ardent foes of the Nazi system, to the process of disintegration from their position as autonomous individuals" (*Surviving and Other Essays*, New York: Knopf, 1979, pp. 82–83). Thus, he thought concentration camps (as opposed to death camps, were never his focus in his theory) should be studied by anyone concerned with comprehending what happens to a population when it is subject to the methods of the Nazi system of power.

For this reason Bettelheim says that if people understand what happens to the individual in the concentration camp, how autonomy and integration are destroyed, then they may acquire a better grasp of "both an oppressive mass society, and what it takes to remain autonomous in any mass society" (*The Informed Heart: Autonomy in a Mass Age*, Glencoe, IL: The Free Press, 1960, p. 107).

Critics of Bettelheim have frequently forgotten that for Bettelheim, the concentration camp was an extreme version of the dangers embedded in the modern mass society, the latter being what was always his main interest. That is, Bettelheim wanted to know what were the necessary inner developments, the higher personality integration as he called it, that individuals required as a counterpoint to progress, to the growing complexity of social and technological development.

## Psychology of the Concentration Camp Inmate

In light of the Nazi aim of breaking the inmates' autonomy and integration, Bettelheim's (and by extension most other inmates') main goal in the concentration camp was "to survive in ways that would protect my physical and moral existence," that is, "retaining [my] humanity" (*The Informed Heart*, pp. 13, 156). Elsewhere, he explains that his main worry besides being killed was that after liberation he would not be the same person he was before he lost his freedom.

Bettelheim suggests that there was a dialectical tension, or two primary poles, that characterized surviving in the concentration camps. Inmates throughout their ordeal had to choose, in the morally ambiguous and shifting circumstances of the camps, the course they would follow. They could survive in a manner that generally reflected autonomy, integration, and humanity as Jehovah's Witnesses, devout Jews and Christians, and, with qualifications, militant Marxists), or in a manner that did not reflect these qualities. The latter group gradually regressed, their pre-incarceration personalities progressively disintegrated, and they eventually identified with the Nazis and adopted a "survival at any price" attitude. These "old prisoners," says Bettelheim, had lost any orientation to the world outside the concentration camp. Bettelheim believed that inmates struggled within the two poles of this dialectical tension, and, furthermore, their attitudes continuously changed, depending on the circumstances in which they found themselves. Moreover, despite what his critics have alleged, Bettelheim never described these two poles as rigid categories; he was well aware that such a nomenclature of inmates was only meant to illustrate certain types of behaviors, and in reality most inmates had to function somewhere within the dialectical tension, what Primo Levi has called "the gray zone" (*The Drowned and the Saved*, New York: Summit, 1986, p. 58). As Bettelheim made quite clear many times, identification with the Nazis was neither inevitable nor a universal response of all inmates. As he wrote, "nearly all prisoners made common cause against the SS most of the time" (*Surviving and Other Essays*, p. 289); "all prisoners hated the Nazi regime, even if and when, without knowing it, they had taken some of its values for their own" (*The Informed Heart*, p. 202).

For those inmates who were more capable of maintaining their autonomy, integration, and humanity in the camps, a number of complex and interrelated modes of thought and action constituted their existence. Most important, Bettelheim emphasizes the crit-

ical function of passionately felt and flexibly applied consistent values and moral convictions and a strong, transcendent belief system. Bettelheim noted, as have Primo Levi, Jean Améry and Elie Wiesel, that "It is a well-known fact of the concentration camps that those who had a strong religious and moral conviction managed life there much better than the rest. . . . Deeply religious persons often helped others, and some voluntarily sacrificed themselves—many more of them than of the average prisoners" (*Surviving and Other Essays*, p. 296).

By virtue of their strongly held transcendent values and beliefs, autonomous inmates also tended to have a greater degree of freedom in choosing their attitudes toward their ordeals, such decision making being vital to maintaining a sense of agency, reducing degradation, and maintaining a semblance of their pre-incarceration personalities. These inmates also had a greater ability to maintain some areas of independent action and thought, as well as to develop meaningful relationships, relatively speaking, in the camps. In other words, for Bettelheim, autonomy, integration, and the inmate's humanity were both protected and expressed in the inmates effort via their transcendent values and beliefs to sustain inner freedom while outwardly adapting.

Bettelheim's main purpose in studying the concentration camps was to understand what were the necessary psychological conditions to avoid personality disintegration and to remain human and how this could be applied to the mass society. Bettelheim summarizes his conclusion:

But most of all, as I have intimated all along, autonomy, self-respect, inner integration, a rich inner life, and the ability to relate to others in meaningful ways were the psychological conditions which, more than any others, permitted one to survive in the camps as much a whole human being as overall conditions and chance would permit (*Surviving and Other Essays*, p. 109)

For Bettelheim, it was those inmates, who lived not simply for life's sake but who had a religious or cultural ideal that transcended them, who were more likely to survive as autonomous persons in the camps.

## The Critics

While Bettelheim's early work served as a point of departure for the expressions of fundamental positions pertaining to the nature of survivorship, and while his books attracted worldwide attention, Bettelheim was severely criticized by Holocaust scholars for a number

of reasons. Many of these criticisms were overstated, unfair, or simply wrong, in part due to the fact that Bettelheim was disliked because he was frequently judgmental, unnecessarily provocative, abrasive, and, at times, historically inaccurate about very sensitive and complex subjects, such as the so-called Jewish passivity and cooperation with the Nazis, “ghetto thinking,” and Anne Frank. Helen Fein (1980) has written a powerful, scholarly critique of Bettelheim’s tendency toward near victim blaming, though there are important psychological insights embedded in Bettelheim’s provocative analyses of these issues.

Bettelheim was also criticized for a number of other reasons. These include: (1) for the implausibility of his concentration camp/mass society analogy (Des Pres, p. 190); (2) for an account of survivorship that was distorted and demeaning, that is, for his use of a reductionistic psychoanalytic framework and, in particular, his claim that some inmates regressed, became part of the anonymous mass without social base and organization, and identified with their Nazi captors (Des Pres, p. 185); (3) for his lack of appreciation of political structures, social hierarchy and the duality of action in his camp narrative (Sofsky, pp. 96–163; Smith, pp. 94–97); (4) for his overly individualistic focus and emphasis on self-assertion (Pfefferkorn, p. 676); and (5) for drawing general conclusions about inmate behavior that failed to respect the difference between an “extreme” situation, where the main Nazi goal was punishment and “reeducation” of inmates (in the concentration camps), and a “terminal” one, where the main goal was the extermination of inmates (in death camps) (Langer, p. 33).

Bettelheim’s insightful description of the disintegration of dignity and personality in the concentration camps and its meaning for the modern dilemma of maintaining autonomy and integration in the mass society is an original and lasting contribution to the

field of Holocaust studies. While Bettelheim was a brilliant, bold, and enormously gifted writer and social essayist on the camps, his work is perhaps best understood as the testimonial of a man who viewed himself, above all else, as a pained Jewish survivor. It is telling that although he did not observe Jewish religious practices, he asked that his family give him a religious burial. Even more uncanny and suggestive, 13 March, the day Bettelheim killed himself, was the same day as the Anschluss (annexation of Austria by Germany).

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